

A Nanai Folk Tale



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Mergen And His Friends



Everyone knows that elephant have trunks.

Long ago and far away, by a mountain stream in snow-mantled Siberia lived Mergen, a bold and skilful Nanai hunter.



Though his table never lacked for fish or meat,
he would slay no more than met his needs.



One day, his hunting led him as far as the mighty Amur River.
But encountering no prey he pushed deep into the dense
Siberian forest where the fearsome old tiger reigned supreme.

As he thrust through the firs and pines he suddenly came upon
a deer stuck fast in a murky swamp.



Mergen was about to loose an arrow at the
beast, when it cried in pitiful tones:

“Spare me, Mergen, help me out of the mire.”

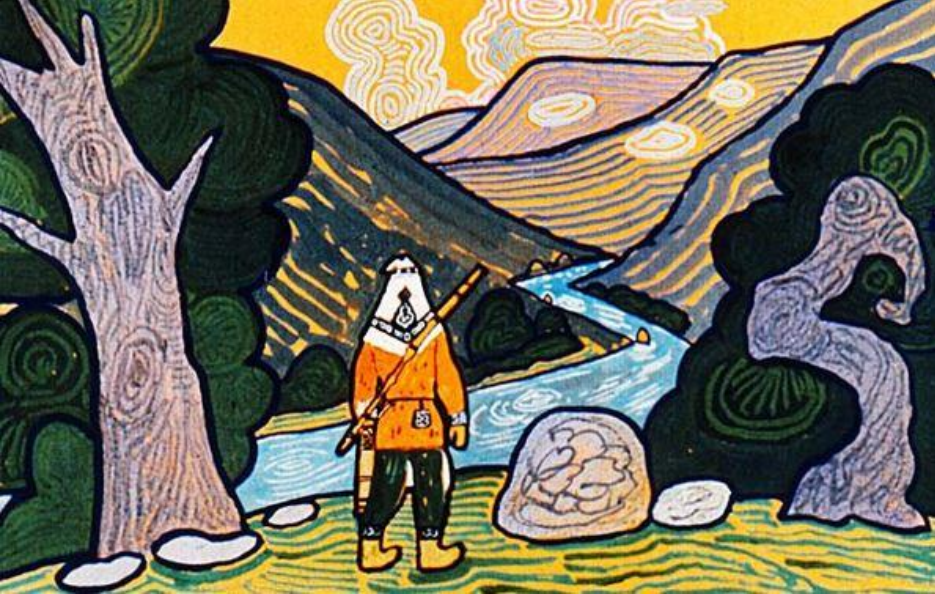


The hunter took pity on the deer
and pulled it from the swamp.



Shaking itself free of the mud the deer said:

“Mergen, whenever you need me, just call.”



So saying it vanished into the trees. Mergen continued through the wild taiga looking about him alertly.



Presently, he spotted an ant almost crushed
by a fall croak branch. The ant begged:

“Mergen, please save me.”



Feeling sorry for the ant, he lifted the branch and set it free.

“Thank you, Mergen. Call me when you have need of me.”



Mergen made his way along the bank of the Amur until he reached a shallow blue pool. There he would rest. But, no sooner had he unfastened his quiver than a hoarse voice wheezed:



“Mergen, rescue me. I’m dying. I’ve been lying here for three days.”



Looking up, Mergen saw a monster sturgeon stranded in the shallows. He thrust his shoulder against the fish's side and edged her towards the river; as she felt deep water under her, she swished her tail hard and dived into the Amur's cool depths.



Mergen had just sat upon a rock to rest
when the sturgeon's head rippled the water.

"Thank you kindly, Mergen. If you ever need
my help, just call me."



After he had rested, the hunter continued on his way until his eye caught an unfamiliar village.



A stout wily-eyed old man emerged
from the biggest and grandest hut.



“Who may you be?” the old man asked amicably.

“I am a huntsman,” replied Mergen. “I was hunting in the taiga and came across your village and thought I'd rest awhile with you.”

“As you please, enter and be my guest,” invited the old man.



Hardly had Mergen feasted his eyes on the splendour of the hut than he heard a tinkle of bronze earrings and a lovely maiden appeared in the doorway.

Her dusky face lit up, her eyes sparkled, her plait as black as night reached almost to her feet.



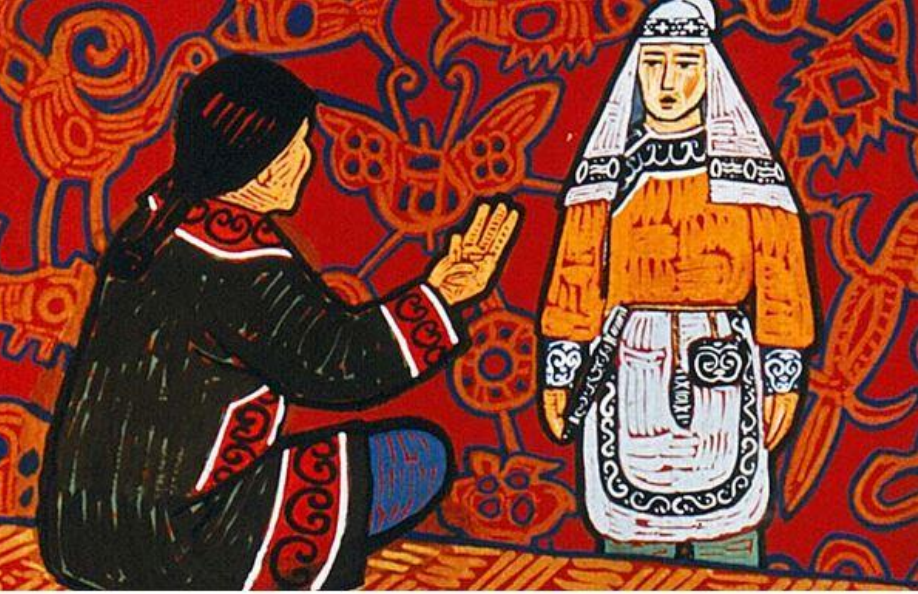
"Well, what do you think of my daughter?"

enquired the old man.

"There are many beauties upon the Amur, but I've never set eyes on one so fair," confessed Mergen. "Let her be my wife and I shall grant you a handsome prize."



“That won’t do at all, Mergen,” said the wily-eyed old man. “A hundred brave hunters have sought her hand, but all are now my slaves.



I shall set you three tasks. Should you fulfil them, you'll be my son, if not, my slave. Think it over."

"Agreed!" exclaimed Mergen without a thought.



“My loyal servants, bring me my iron boots!”
shouted the old man.

The servants shortly appeared, scarcely dragging
the heavy boots along.

“Take these iron boots. If you wear them out in a
single night, come for your second task,” said the
old man.



Mergen put on the hoots and went into the taiga.

"I'd have to live a hundred lives to wear out boots like these," he reflected sadly. Then, suddenly, he remembered the deer.

"Deer, my friend, come to my aid!" he cried.



Before the echo died away, there was
the deer standing before the hunter.

Mergen recounted his ill fortune.



Without a word the deer pulled the boots on its front legs and dashed off into the hills, leaving a trail of sparks like heavenly stars across the night.



In the meantime Mergen lay upon the grass and fell asleep. When he awoke at dawn the deer was already there: all that remained of the brand new iron hoots were tattered tops.



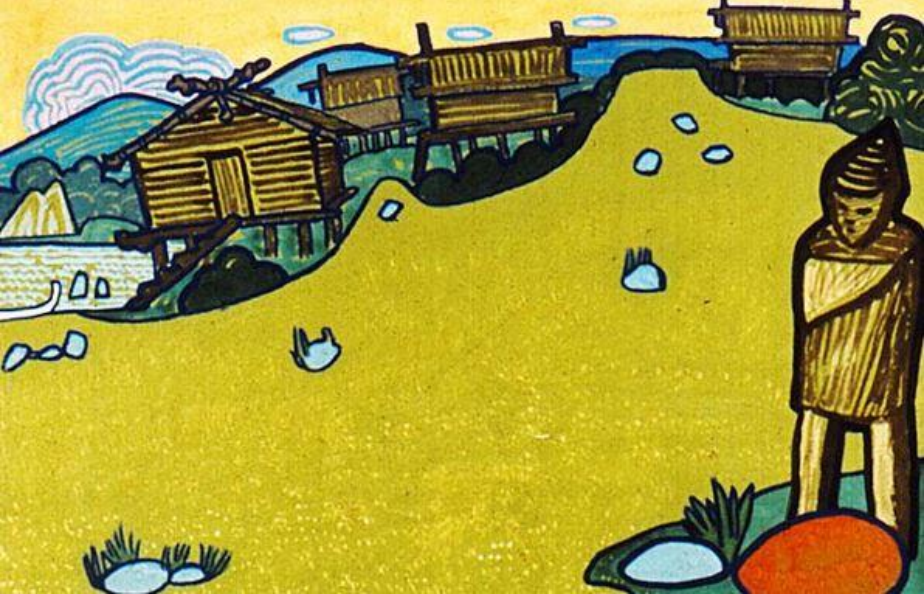
Mergen was overjoyed. Kissing his friend upon its warm nose, he seized the tatters and hastened to the village.



When he reached the master's hut he pounded noisily on the wall until the old man came rushing out.

Hurling the remains of the boots at his feet, Mergen cried:

"Give me my second task!"



For a moment the old man was quite speechless. When he had recovered from his astonishment he shouted:

“Servants, fetch me five sacks of millet!”

The old man tipped out the millet upon the ground so that the grains spread far and wide across the entire village.



Then he chuckled:

“Now gather up all the millet so that not a single grain is lost.
You have just one day.”



Mergen went into the meadow,
lay upon the ground and called:
“Ant, my friend, come to my aid!”



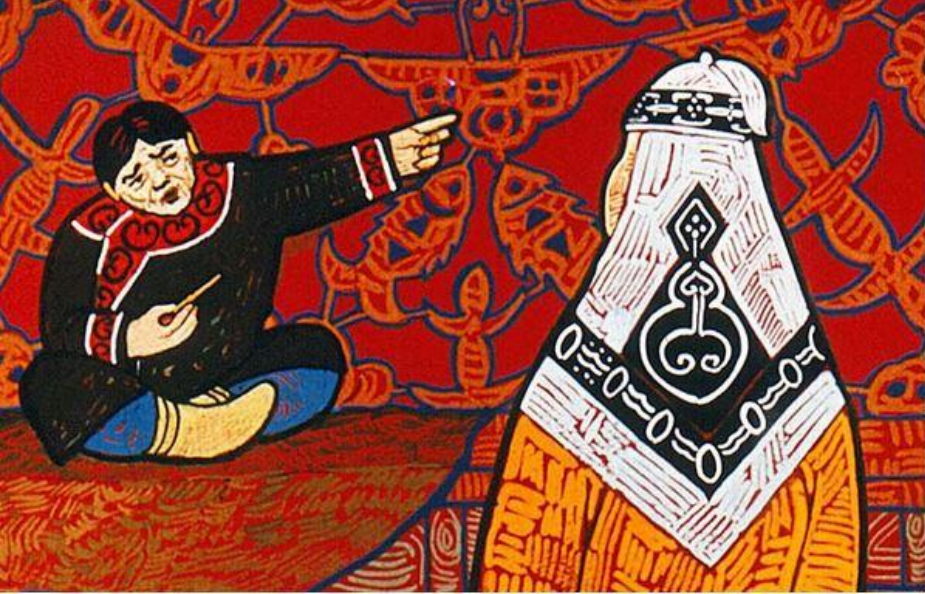
At once the ant appeared and listened to the hunter's story. Then he summoned his brothers and the earth was soon teeming with ants — so many that they covered every nook and cranny of the village.



Before Mergen had a chance to smoke a pipeful of tobacco, every grain of millet had been returned to the sacks.

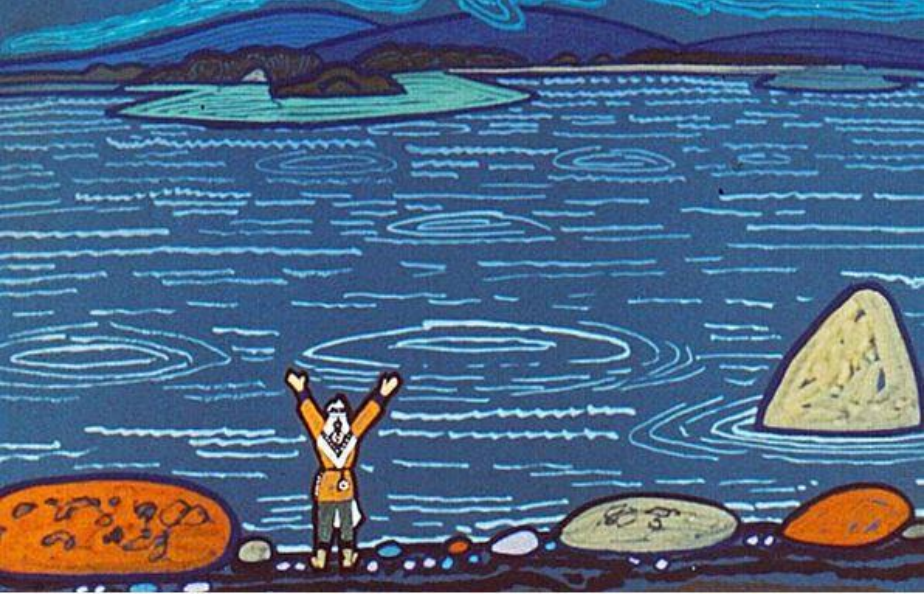


He thanked the ants and went to the old man, who was even more amazed.



Scratching his head, he said:

“I shall set you one final task. If you succeed, my daughter will be yours. Many moons ago, when my father was young, he dropped a golden ring into the Amur. You have until evening to find it.”



Once again Mergen was crestfallen as he left the hut.
But the sight of the maiden's white handkerchief
waving to him from the window gave him heart and he
strode quickly to the riverbank.

"Sturgeon, queen of all fish. Come to my aid!"



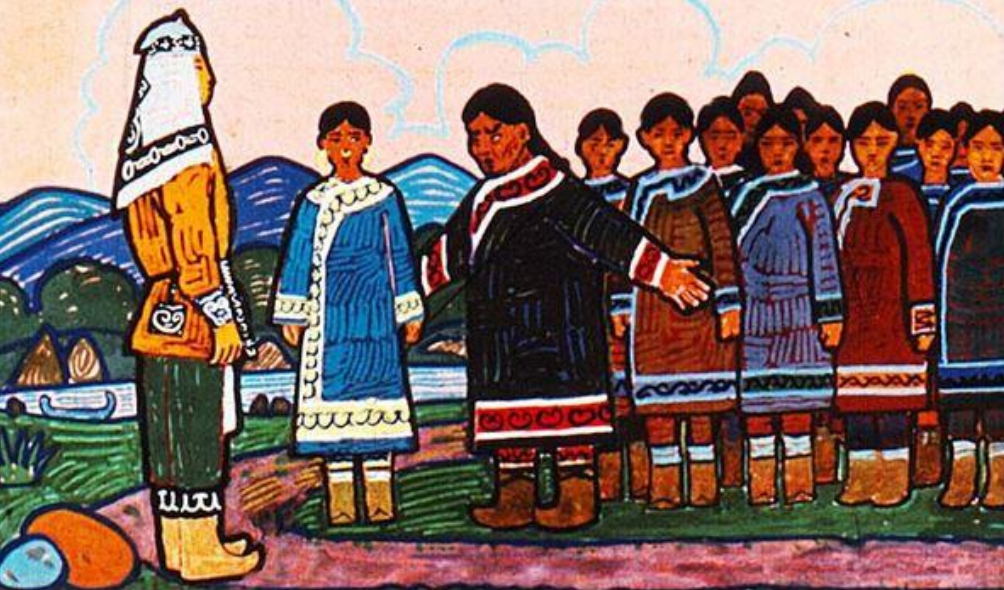
Thrice he called into the depths before
the Amur bubbled up, and the sturgeon's
huge head thrust through the waters.
Mergen imparted all his sorrows to her.



Without a word the sturgeon dived to the riverbed and summoned every denizen of the Amur deep.



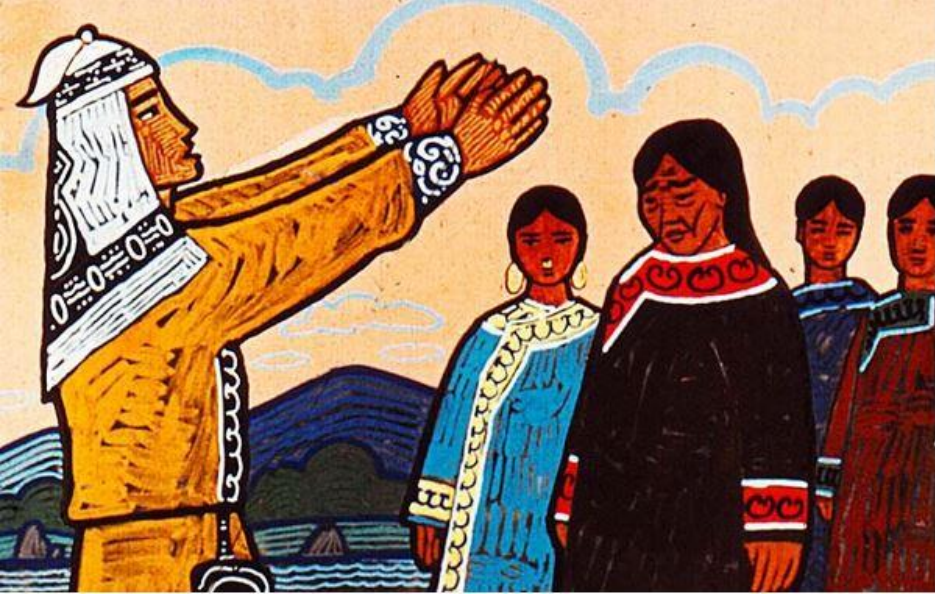
Fish big and small darted to and fro along the riverbed until the ring was found.



The delighted hunter bore the golden ring to the old man, who took it and disappeared into the hut.

Presently, he emerged, his smiling daughter at his side:

“Here you are, my bold and dashing hunter. Take my daughter for your wife. Also take, if you will, myself, my slaves, my servants and my entire village. It is yours.”



Mergen then replied:

“I thank you. Only from this day forth
there shall be no slaves nor servants. We
shall all be brothers and live in peace.”



From that time on they lived happy and contented. And good fortune never left the hunters of the Nanai village on the bank of the Amur River.